

RELIEF OF DISTRESS (IRELAND).

RETURN to an Order of the Honourable The House of Commons,
dated 27 August 1886;—for,

COPY "of Mr. TUKE's REPORT on the RELIEF of DISTRESS in the West of
Ireland, undertaken by him at the Request of the Government."

Dublin Castle,
2 September 1886. }

R. G. C. HAMILTON.

COPY of MR. TUKE's REPORT on the RELIEF of DISTRESS in the West
of *Ireland*.

To the Right Honourable *John Morley*, M.P., Chief Secretary for Ireland.

Sir,

Hitchin, 7 May 1886.

THE time has now arrived when the work which, at the request of the Chief Secretary, I undertook for supplying seed potatoes to portions of the west of Ireland must of necessity be brought to a close. It seems therefore my duty, at the earliest date, to give such information as is in my power as to the nature and extent of the work undertaken. When I left home on 7th March, it was with the idea that the area which needed a supply of seed potatoes was chiefly, if not wholly, confined to Achill and other islands off the western coast of Ireland. Achill, the largest of these islands, was especially pointed to as needing help.

Subsequent information showed how erroneous this idea was, and that nearly the whole coast line of Connaught required to be relieved.

In passing through Dublin on my way to the west, it was arranged, after consultation with his Excellency the Lord Lieutenant and the Vice President of the Local Government Board, and others, that I should undertake to supply the islands of Achill, Boffin, and Shark with seed potatoes. Whilst Mr. Brady, Inspector of Fisheries, and others, undertook Clare and Innisturk, as well as the isles of Arran, in the Bay of Galway.

On arriving at the island of Achill I found that a relief committee, presided over by the parish priest, Father O'Connor, was in active operation; the lists of the relief committee showed that no less than 750 families, out of the 1,000 or 1,100 on the island, were being partially relieved by doles of meal.

Taking the lists of this committee as the basis of my inquiries, I made, in conjunction with Captain Rutledge Fair, who accompanied me, a very careful inspection of most of the villages on the island; and whilst we found it desirable to exclude from our list a few persons who appeared to have sufficient seed potatoes, we also found it needful to add a considerably larger number who possessed very little or no seed. The final result of our inquiries led us to place 934 families on our lists; these have been provided with seed, varying in quantity from 4 to 10 cwt. each, with the exception of a few families who, being possessed of some seed of their own, received 2 cwt. each.

That 954 out of about 1,100 families on the island of Achill should require to be assisted must be regarded as conclusive evidence of the destruction of the potato crop caused by the severe storms of last August.

It may be of interest to notice that the supply of seed was received with the greatest satisfaction by the people, many of whom, in order to obtain it, have to walk from 15 to 20 miles.

The difficulties experienced in conveying the seed to the island, as well as in its subsequent distribution, were very great.

The weather was unusually stormy, and for more than a fortnight the wind, and frequently snow and hail, were fighting against us. There is no harbour or pier of any size on the island of Achill, and for many days no gunboat or other vessel could approach the coast. This compelled us to store the potatoes at Westport (more than 30 miles distant), where they were left by the Glasgow steamers, awaiting transshipment to the island, in the gunboats placed by the Admiralty at our disposal.

On more than one occasion, after being detained some days in Westport by the weather, the gunboats having started, were driven back again into port after vainly attempting to make the passage; nor did the difficulty end here, for when the gunboats were able to reach Achill the discharge of 30 to 60 tons of potatoes over the ship's side into hookers or boats was attended with no small risk or trouble in the open roadstead.

The work was consequently very much delayed, and it took more than three weeks to complete the distribution in the island of Achill alone.

In the islands of Boffin and Shark the want of food and acute distress of the people were more evident than in Achill, where the fortnightly doles of meal from the relief committee had prevented the actual destitution evident in Boffin. So much was food needed in Boffin, that I thought it absolutely necessary to send a supply of Indian meal (five tons) into the island, before the potatoes were delivered, with the double object of relieving the distress and preventing the possible eating of the seed potatoes.

In the islands of Boffin and Shark 223 out of the total number of 240 families in the island were supplied with seed.

It will thus be seen that in the islands of Achill, Boffin, and Shark, 1,177 families have been provided with seed, amounting in the whole to 450 tons, at a cost of 1,540 £. The potatoes supplied to the islands were Scotch Champions. Subsequently, nearly all the seed potatoes were purchased in Londonderry, being Champions grown in the north of Ireland from Scotch seed recently imported.

MAINLAND.—COAST OF CONNAUGHT.

Leaving the islands, I now proceed to report on the work done on the mainland. As already noted, it soon became evident that the storms which had injured the potato crop on the islands, had, with greater or less severity, affected the whole coast-line of Connaught.

If the work attempted on the islands was a necessity, it was equally needed for the inhabitants of the villages and hamlets on the ragged coasts of Mayo and Galway. Convinced of this, it became necessary to endeavour to obtain the funds required to provide almost at a moment's notice for a supply of seed for a population four or five times larger than that on the islands, scattered at intervals along a coast-line of nearly 200 miles.

To be thus suddenly called upon to supply seed to districts wholly without railways, and situated upon a line of coast nearly equal in extent to the three English counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex, and accessible only for these supplies to steamers, which were frequently delayed by severe weather, was a task of no small difficulty. In addition, the whole of the funds for this portion of the

the work had to be appealed for and raised in the very short period which the season allowed for the planting of potatoes. In this emergency I was most generously helped by the Lord Lieutenant (Lord Aberdeen), who privately gave me a guarantee for so considerable a sum that I was enabled to commence the work at once, and arrange in part for the supply of the necessary seed. As the funds came in steadily in response to appeals which appeared in several of the leading London papers, I was able gradually to respond to the pressing demands which were daily showered on me by the clergy and others in the districts named.

With the exception of Belmullet and Killala, where the inquiries and distribution of seed were undertaken by Captain Sampson, Local Government Inspector, I visited nearly the whole of the districts along the coast, and, with the invaluable assistance of Captain Rutledge Fair, superintended the distribution of seed. The selection of the families most needing help from the somewhat promiscuous lists supplied to us (including sometimes nearly every family in the district), was a work which occupied much time and thought. The difficulty of obtaining reliable information and of deciding on the nice shades of difference in the needs of thousands of applicants, all of whom appeared equally poor, was enormous.

In these inquiries we received in nearly all cases much assistance from the Roman Catholic clergy, police authorities, and other residents in the district.

As the result of the work thus noted, I subjoin a list of the places assisted, and of the quantities of seed supplied.

The total number of families assisted on the mainland and islands exceeds, 6,000, and the amount expended will be about 5,000 *l.* The cost per ton of the potatoes has ranged from 3 *l.* to 3 *l.* 15 *s.*, including freight and sacks, the latter charged 5 *s.* per ton.

The amounts so kindly contributed by the public from first to last has been 5,200 *l.*; there are, however, some liabilities incurred which will nearly absorb the balance.

An audited account will be furnished to the subscribers when the work is finally completed. I cannot conclude my report without an expression of sincere gratitude for the assistance and marked kindness invariably extended to me by his Excellency the Lord Lieutenant, yourself, and Sir Robert Hamilton.

My grateful thanks are also due to the Vice President of the Local Government Board, to Admiral Hickley and the officers of the gunboats. I wish also specially to record my sense of the invaluable services rendered by the officers and men of the coast guard, constabulary, and crews of the gunboats.

I remain, &c.
(signed) *James H. Tuke.*

P.S.—I append also a copy of my letter to the "Times," of 25th March, which gives in a condensed form the fuller information which from time to time I forwarded to his Excellency at his request.

(signed) *J. H. T.*

DISTRIBUTION OF SEED POTATOES

LIST of Places supplied, and Quantities to each.

	<i>Tons.</i>
Achill Island - - - - -	375
Boffin and Shark - - - - -	80
Belmullet, Rosfort, and Island of Inniskeen - - - - -	140
Killala and Innismurragh - - - - -	90
Villages on north shore of Clew Bay, Newport - - - - -	100
Villages on south shore of Clew Bay, Westport - - - - -	120
Leenane, &c. - - - - -	50
Cleggan and Benvyle, Sileerna and Omev Island, Clifden and Roundstone, Cahel and Carna and Kilkerran, all in Clifden Union - - - - -	480
Canarae, in Oughterard Union - - - - -	30
Partry, Aughnagower, Islandlady, Innishfin, Innisterra, &c. - - - - -	70
TOTAL - - -	1,435

COPY of LETTER to "The Times," 25th March 1846.

DISTRESS IN THE WEST OF IRELAND.

Sir,

I HAVE just returned to Westport, after a minute inquiry into the condition of the islands of Achill, Boffin, and Shark, and also of a considerable portion of the mainland on the coasts of Mayo and Galway. When I left home it was with the impression that the small fund generously placed at my disposal, in answer to a private appeal, would have sufficed to supply seed potatoes for these islands; but my investigations have proved that the need was greater than I expected, and also that on portions of the mainland the necessity of seed potatoes is as great as on the islands.

On arriving at the island of Achill, which contains about 1,000 families (say, 6,000 persons), I found that the present distress was so great that a relief committee, presided over by Father O'Connor, P.P., was in active operation, distributing Indian meal, at a cost of 120 £ a week, but in return for work on new roads to more than half the families on the island; and that the number needing relief was increasing. And with regard to the requirements of seed potatoes in order to avert yet further distress in the future, I was assured that unless seed were given 80 per cent. of the holdings would practically remain unown, and that even for the remaining 20 per cent. there would not be the full quantity of seed. My own visits for four days throughout the island, entering a very large number of houses, the least poor as well as the poorest, confirmed the gloomy statements made to me alike by the Committee, the clergy, the police, and others; and I have no hesitation in saying that the absolute wants of the people have not, and hardly can be, exaggerated. The island is like a besieged city, in a state of semi-famine, the people relieved by fortnightly doles of barley, half the amount of meal required, those who yet have a few treasured potatoes eating them like measured rations, sensible that they are consuming their only hope of escape from future famine, all without credit and without means of obtaining supplies. During those four days we were witnesses of scenes of privation and suffering borne with a patience and resignation which it was impossible to see unmoved. And as an example of the condition of the island I will select from my notes the story of one village.

March

March 15.—Visited Doogo, East and West, two small villages on the sea shore containing 110 houses more like dirty cattle sheds, and 600 or 700 persons. With the exception of nine families, two of whom had out-door relief, all were receiving fortnightly allowances of meal from the Relief Committee. Rents and holdings very small; three only at or above 2 l. per annum, the majority varying from 20 s. to 30 s., and some as low as 5 s. or 10 s. Visited 20 or more houses; each, in varying degrees, had the same story, "the potatoes were killed by the August storm," and either, "we have none left," or, "we are eating the little store of seed, yer honour;" while a few told us that they still had one-fourth or one-third of the ordinary quantity of potatoes for sowing. None begged for money; all asked for work, so as to obtain meal for their families, and implored for seed with which to plant their holdings; and as the whole male population assembled round as like a small parliament, we had ample opportunity for hearing the *cor populi*. "What we want, yer honour, is piers, and help with the fishing; but the piers, yer honour, are the first; for if we had them we could go out with our own small boats every day, and need not go to England; and now for days we are idle, and dare not venture out with the rough seas." "Where is the place for the pier, which you think would help you?" we ask, and instantly the moveable parliament, hoodless of the snow and wind howling around, led us to the two or three places which, in the views of the wisest, were deemed the best. Their practical explanations were clear and lucid, and the reasons *pro* and *con* stated (it is hardly needful to say) with force and energy.

On our return we took shelter in a small shop, and from the owner, who hospitably boiled a kettle and provided us with tea, I learnt the following:—Asked, "What meal are you selling weekly?" "None, now to the people, except that an order from the Committee (Relief)." "How much last year at this time?" "We and the other shops sold four to six tons of meal a week, and all the people get now is about one and a-half ton per week from the Committee." "How much tea did you sell last year per week?" "About four or five pounds, and now all I sell is a quarter of a pound each to the relieving officer and myself; and the little chest I ordered is going back to the merchant." "How much tobacco was sold weekly last year?" "Five or six pounds, and now I have only an empty canister; no one can buy. We cannot give more credit, the people owe me from 4 l. or 6 l. to 10 l., and some 17 l. each, and I owe my merchant at Westport and cannot pay him." "Were the rents paid?" we asked. "Yes, up to March 1885, but now it is impossible."

The people spoke of the stoppage of credit as one great cause of the distress. "Last year we could get a bag of meal on credit, for they knew we would pay when we came back from England, or had the little beast or cow to sell. This year the English wages came to nothing; the most we brought home with us was 2 l., 3 l., or 4 l., and many earned nothing, and had to send for or borrow money to bring us back, and some are staying in England because they had no earnings to bring them home." "Are you as badly off as in 1879-80?" "We are worse, yer honour, because we had the English earnings then, and could get a price for the cattle. Now, if we drove the cattle to four shillings we cannot get a price, and the shepherd will not give us a bag of meal (14 s.) for a cow. I sold my milk cow for 15 s., and now have none for the family." This impossibility of getting food for the cattle I heard of everywhere.

Here, then, in this village is a summary of the condition of the island, except that in the better villages 10 or 15 or 20 per cent may have a little store of seed and some means to buy potatoes. The four causes of the present condition cannot be more clearly shown than from the above.

Causes of it.—(1.) Destruction of the potato crop by August storms. (2.) Want of English earnings from shortness of labour there. (3.) Inability to sell stock when held. (4.) Stoppage of credit.

For the immediate provision of seed potatoes I arrange to supply, in quantities varying from five to ten hundred-weight, according to size of family, sufficient Scotch champions for 750 or 800 families. Lists were prepared with the utmost care, and verified as we went round the villages, or by consultation with those most qualified to judge. Further, no seed is to be delivered unless a form supplied to the applicants stating that the lands are cultivated has been signed by two of the head men of the village. The announcement of this grant was received with the utmost thankfulness, and seemed to fill the hearts of the people with renewed energy and hope. I must not conclude this notice of Achill without saying that the Relief Committee is working with the utmost energy to meet the present emergency, and as it is dependent on subscriptions its position is a very difficult one.

On my return from Achill to Westport I visited several villages on the mainland, reported to be very poor, and the unexpected extent of their destitution induced me to proceed to Dublin to confer with the Lord Lieutenant, who has, throughout, shown the warmest interest in the work. In the meantime Captain Rutledge Fair, special Local Government Board Inspector, proceeded to Boffin and Shark. These islands are about 10 miles from the mainland, and contain 240 families, of whom a considerable number are in receipt of out-door relief. Having regard to the almost entire absence of out-door relief in Ireland no greater proof than this can be given of the destitution in those islands. On

my return from Dublin I met Captain Fair at Clifden, and the following notes taken from his statement will show how great is the necessity for help. After two days of most minute inquiries on the islands, and from the statements of the police, coast guards, medical officers, shopkeepers, and the people, Captain Fair is of opinion that the two islands are in as bad circumstances as the poorest districts in Achill, and even in some cases worse, and that the destitution is considered greater than at any period, and certainly greater than in 1879-80. The priest, Father Colliersia, stated that a few weeks ago he had distributed some seed potatoes among the poorest families, and that it had since come to his knowledge that some had eaten them in their great hunger. It seemed necessary, therefore, to guard against the great probability of the people in their want consuming the seed potatoes about to be supplied, and as there is no local relief committee, and the funds at the disposal of the priest very limited, and even the supply of meal on the island very small, Captain Fair advised that five tons of meal should be sent for distribution amongst the poorest. One case only shall be quoted to give an idea of the condition of the many. Pat Lavelle said: "I have six children nearly naked sleeping in one bed; . . . No potatoes at all; I fish a little, but caught scarcely anything; I have one-and-a-half acre (Irish); could sow three-and-a-half bushels of potatoes; my wife had to sell the bed and blankets to get food; would have starved if it were not for the priest." As to the condition of the people in Clifden Union living along the coast (twice the population of Achill), space will not permit me to say more than that three days spent among them have more than confirmed the worst apprehension which my intimate acquaintance with the union led me to entertain. One district in particular struck me as worse than the worst in Achill. And Captain Sampson, Local Government Board Inspector, who had recently visited Belmullet, informed me that equally with other parts of the coast, portions of that union were almost bordering upon famine.

We have thus before us the condition of nearly the whole coast line of Mayo, and a large portion of that of Galway; in other words, the greater portion of the unions of Belmullet, Newport, Westport, and Clifden. Of the condition of the people outside these districts I have no certain knowledge, but it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, although the line of destitution is probably a thin one, the poverty in these districts is of a very serious character, and needing the most careful and immediate consideration; first, as regards the supply of seed potatoes, which can alone avert partial famine in the coming winter; and, secondly, for the present emergency, that some well-timed system of relief, given in return for work done by the people, should at once be instituted. The statement of the conclusion on the latter point, to which I have been compelled to come, has been received with the utmost courtesy and attention by the Government, and I feel convinced that whatever can be promptly and effectually done to relieve the necessities, without involving the frightful demoralisation of former relief works, will, if possible, be attempted.

But the supply of seed potatoes to these districts on the mainland is the point to which I wish most earnestly to call attention. The importance of such supply will be more readily appreciated when I say that, without it, many hundreds of families will have to be supported by the rates or public charity during the coming year. Given the seed potatoes, and these families whose lands are now tilled and manured, will have the food secured to them which will support them during the coming autumn and winter. A sum of 1,500 *l.* placed at once at my disposal would permit me to bestow this great boon upon hundreds of families, who otherwise will be left in despair.

All the needful arrangements are at this moment complete. Three gunboats have been placed at our service, and, with their help, the first distribution of 80 tons of seed to the Achill islanders has to-day been satisfactorily accomplished. I have a most efficient and competent staff, and all that I require is to know that by the promise of about 1,500 *l.* I may, without delay, proceed to order the potatoes, and extend to the mainland, where needed, the great boon which my friends have so generously enabled me to bestow upon the islands. Each day's delay in providing the seed is of importance, for in many districts the crops are usually sown before this. I trust that I shall not appeal in vain on behalf of these impoverished people.

Any subscriptions for this object will be gladly received and acknowledged by Mr. Sydney Buxton, 15, Eaton-place, S.W.; or by Mr. H. Hodgkin, 109, Park-street, W.

Westport, County Mayo, 25 March.

I am, &c.
(signed) J. H. Tuke.

